

DATE: April 29, 2005
TO: Planning Commission
SUBJECT: North County MSCP (District: 2, 3, 5)

SUMMARY:

Overview

The North County MSCP Plan is intended to protect key sensitive plant and animal populations and habitats within the County. It will allow currently threatened and endangered species to maintain or improve their status in the wild and eliminate the need to list more species as endangered in the future under Federal and State Endangered Species Acts. The North County MSCP Plan currently proposes coverage for 58 species; however, the total species covered by the North County MSCP Plan may fluctuate based on the review process. It is also designed to accommodate continued economic growth and improve quality of life. The North County MSCP Plan will provide an economic benefit by reducing constraints on future development and decreasing the costs of compliance with federal and state laws protecting biological resources.

Recommendation(s)

INFORMATIONAL ITEM – NO ACTION REQUIRED

Fiscal Impact

N/A

Business Impact Statement

N/A

Advisory Board Statement

N/A

Involved Parties

N/A

BACKGROUND:

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PROJECT LOCATION:

The North County MSCP Plan study area covers approximately 311,800 acres. The North County MSCP Plan is bounded by the following neighboring jurisdictions and conservation planning boundaries: to the north the North County MSCP Plan extends to Riverside County line. To the west the North County MSCP Plan extends to the eastern edge of Camp Pendleton Marine Base and the northern coastal cities of San Diego County. To the south the North County MSCP Plan extends to the existing MSCP South County Subarea boundary around Lake Hodges, Rancho Santa Fe, San Pasqual Valley, Mount Woodson, and Fernbrook. To the east the Cleveland National Forest predominantly bounds the North County MSCP Plan boundaries.

Communities contained within the North County MSCP Plan include Bonsall, De Luz, Fallbrook, Harmony Grove, Lilac, Pala, Pauma Valley, Rainbow, Rincon Springs, Twin Oaks Valley, Valley Center and much of Ramona. The incorporated cities of Carlsbad, Encinitas, Escondido, Oceanside, San Marcos, Solana Beach, and Vista are excluded from the study area and will be planned as the Multiple Habitat Conservation Program, sponsored by SANDAG. Military Lands (Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton and Fallbrook Naval Armory) and Indian Reservations are also excluded from the study area.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

The North County MSCP Plan is intended to protect key sensitive plant and animal populations and habitats within the County. It will allow currently threatened and endangered species to maintain or improve their status in the wild and eliminate the need to list more species as endangered in the future under Federal and State Endangered Species Acts. The North County MSCP Plan currently proposes coverage for 58 species; however, the total species covered by the North County MSCP Plan may fluctuate based on the review process. It is also designed to accommodate continued economic growth and improve quality of life. The North County MSCP Plan will provide an economic benefit by reducing constraints on future development and decreasing the costs of compliance with federal and state laws protecting biological resources.

The North County MSCP Plan is a cooperative effort among the County and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Game (Wildlife Agencies). Authority for this process comes from California's Natural Community Conservation Planning (NCCP) Act and section 10(a) of the Federal Endangered Species Act that provides for the preparation of Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs). This program will support applications to the Wildlife Agencies for incidental "take" of threatened or endangered species. Incidental take may be authorized for otherwise legal activities that will allow harm to listed individuals or their habitat in return to support conservation in planned preserve areas. Once the County obtains take authorization, it can permit take for projects that conform to the standards outlined in the plan. Because the North County MSCP Plan is a cooperative effort between the County and the Wildlife Agencies, the North County MSCP will require the preparation of a Joint National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) /California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)/Environmental Impact Report (EIR).

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The overall effect of the North County MSCP Plan is to create large, connected preserve areas that address the regional habitat needs for a number of species together and provide for ongoing management and monitoring. The North County MSCP Plan is the second of three County Habitat Conservation Plans that will work together to protect sensitive plants, animals, and their habitats in the unincorporated portions of the County of San Diego. Currently, there is a Subarea Plan that covers South County and a Plan for East County is in its initial planning phase. The north county cities (Solana Beach to Oceanside and east to Escondido) have recently completed a subregional plan – the Multiple Habitat Conservation Plan. The North County MSCP Plan will provide connections to the planned open space areas in the Multiple Habitat Conservation Plan as well as the South County MSCP Subarea Plan, thereby providing a regional open space preserve system. This also provides an opportunity for coordinated management and monitoring of preserves throughout the region. Outside of multiple species planning programs project-level mitigation occurs for relatively few species and can result in small, isolated open space easements without adequate management or monitoring requirements. The North County MSCP Plan will include a requirement to manage, maintain and monitor plant and animal life on the lands once they are acquired or dedicated as preserve lands. There are two levels of management activities: stewardship (removal of trash, prevention of trespass, erosion control, etc.) and biological monitoring (habitat monitoring, corridor monitoring, species-specific surveys).

There are six specific conservation areas associated with this plan:

- I. Publicly-Owned Preserve Areas. These are permanent open space preserve areas owned and managed by public agencies.
- II. Pre-negotiated “Hardline” Areas. These are areas where portions of private land development projects have been identified for development and others committed to the North County MSCP Plan preserve as permanent open space.
- III. Pre-Approved Mitigation Area (PAMA). Lands within the PAMA have been identified through an extensive computer modeling process and independent scientific review as being of high biological importance. Mitigation, in the form of private land open space dedications, will be encouraged to take place in these areas as set forth in the NCBMO. Development may occur within the PAMA area but mitigation ratios are higher and certain design standards must be met as set forth in the NCBMO. The County anticipates that 75% of the PAMA will be preserved as natural open space or agricultural lands through acquisition of lands in fee title or easements by public and private organizations and private land dedications.
- IV. San Luis Rey River Regional Park Area. Preservation of habitat within the San Luis Rey River Regional Park Area is proposed to meet outdoor recreational needs of San Diego County residents and help provide coverage for incidental take of species under the North County MSCP Plan for the widening of State

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Route 76. Take authorization for the improvement of State Route 76 will be permitted if the improvement plans meet set criteria and goals.

- V. Working Landscapes. These areas include agricultural operations that maintain conservation value for endangered species such as the Arroyo Toad and the Stephen's Kangaroo Rat, and may also provide habitat connectivity in core and linkage areas. Maintaining agriculture in these areas will be encouraged. The County is investigating a variety of economic incentive programs for landowners in these areas such as exempting agricultural clearing from NCBMO in areas outside of Pre-approved Mitigation Areas, if Agricultural Conservation Easements are granted to the County on areas to be cleared
- VI. The Ramona Vernal Pools Planning Area. Vernal pools in the downtown area of Ramona and the adjacent grasslands have been assessed in a study funded by the Environmental Protection Agency. The results from the final report will be incorporated into the plan. The Ramona Vernal Pool component will prescribe a process for project review and mitigation to preserve the most valuable pools with the greatest likelihood of perpetual preservation.

PROJECT ISSUES:

N/A

ENVIRONMENTAL STATUS:

A Joint Environmental Impact Report and Environmental Impact Statement will be prepared on the draft plan and map. A consultant has been hired to perform this work and has begun the initial tasks of preparing these documents

PREVIOUS ACTIONS:

On July 17, 1996 (6), the Board of Supervisors directed the Department of Planning and Land Use to embark on the development of the North County Subarea of the Multiple Species Conservation Program.

PUBLIC INPUT:

N/A

DEPARTMENT REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION:

This request is consistent with the County of San Diego Strategic Plan Environment Initiative to "Promote natural resource management strategies that ensure environmental preservation, quality of life and economic development" because it will enable continued planning of the North County Multiple Species Conservation Program Subarea Plan. The intent of this plan is not only to provide a means to assemble a regional open space preserve system, but also to provide a means for a more predictable and streamlined development review process.

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